

## **E-PARTICIPATION**

Definitions of e-participation is the basic concept of using information and communication technologies (ICTs) to engage citizen in decision-making and public service delivery. The definition used by the UN is “the process of engaging citizens through ICTs in policy, decision-making, and service design and delivery so as to make it participatory, inclusive and deliberative”. Rose and Flak define e-participation as a social activity, mediated by ICT, involving interaction between citizens, public administration and politicians. This definition highlights the key importance of the triangle citizens – public administration – politicians as actors in e-participation initiatives. They are the key stakeholders to consider when looking at the success and impact of such initiatives. In all these definitions, government has a role to play. That is to say, e-participation usually does not cover civic initiatives or political discussions that take place without the involvement of the government as initiator, moderator, or receiver. Given the increasing presence of such initiatives in recent years, the question of their articulation with formal institutional processes has been a key subject of attention.

As a sub-field of participation, e-participation is seen as necessary both for essential reasons and for instrumental reasons. Essential reasons are based on the idea that participation (online or offline) is a desirable goal, which contributes to inclusive societies both directly and through increased civic engagement. Instrumental reasons focus on the role that e-participation mechanisms can play in increasing government accountability, making public services more responsive to citizens’ needs, and improving the quality of policies and legislation. Broader goals include strengthening the legitimacy of governments and citizens’ trust in public institutions. In addition, e-participation can also be analysed from a technology viewpoint as a way to enhance digital governance, for example for smart cities, and move towards digital societies. By definition, e-participation is both a subset of participation and of e-government. It is also connected to several other dimensions of governance and public administration.

### **E-Participation as a Subset of Participation**

Participation is a key dimension of governance. Based on Arnstein’s participation ladder, several degrees of participation are usually distinguished. In the participation literature, a common reference is the International Association for Public Participation (IAPP) scale. The scale has five steps: information; consultation; collaboration; involvement; and empowerment. The literature on e-participation has adopted different scales to measure levels of participation. Some authors use a five-point scale that mirror the IAPP scale, adding the “e-” prefix in front of the five points of that scale. However, experts of e-participation more commonly use a three-point scale that distinguishes between provision of information (whereby the government provides information to citizens); consultation (whereby the government consults citizens on policy or on service delivery at different stages of the process, and possibly provides feedback to them); and decision-making (whereby the government involves citizens in decision-making). The UN e-government Survey has used this scale since its inception. The three steps are sometimes referred to as e-enabling, e-engaging, and e-empowering.

In general, while the distinction between the first two steps (information and consultation) is conceptually straightforward, distinguishing among involvement, collaboration and empowerment is not always easy. Another distinction that is relevant for analysing e-participation is that between decision-making and agenda-setting. While in the

former, citizens can influence the decisions that are taken in the context of a given policy or service provision initiative, the choice of what to address is made by the government. In contrast, agenda-setting means that citizens, not the government, can propose what should be acted upon. In the context of e-participation, this is a key difference between initiatives such as policy consultations, where citizens have the possibility to provide comments and inputs during the process of policy elaboration, and e-petitions, through which citizens can influence the policy agenda of formal institutions.

### **E-Participation within E-Government**

E-government is usually defined as “the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) for the provision of public services”. Most of the e-government literature thus focuses on the electronic delivery of public services. E-participation is usually considered part of e-government. This is understandable, inasmuch as e-participation refers to “those participation initiatives that are mediated through ICTs”.

However, the scope of e-government has broadened beyond the delivery of public services, as reflected by a semantic shift from e-government to “digital government” and “digital governance”, which emphasizes the role that ICT play in governance. A large field of literature studies “e-democracy”, defined as “the use of ICT to support the democratic decision-making processes”. That literature puts emphasis on civic participation in the construction of the political discourse, and engagement of citizens in direct participation (as opposed to participation through representatives). In between the two, the sphere of policy-making is usually considered as part of e-government and is included in studies of e-democracy and e-participation.

There are differences in the construction of the political discourse and engagement of citizens in political agendas, to policy-making, to the design and delivery of public services. It is difficult to define precise boundaries between those categories. However, the associated e-participation mechanisms vary depending on where in the continuum one looks. It is also clear that governments put different emphasis on the three categories depending on the political regimes and the prevailing values in public administration. This has consequences for the understanding of the potential and limitations of e-participation initiatives.

### **Link with other Concepts**

Other dimensions of governance are connected to e-participation and often mentioned in relation to the latter. For conceptual clarity, it is important to distinguish between those.

1. Inclusiveness or inclusion: In the context of e-government, inclusion can be defined as the imperative for governments to reach all citizens. From the beginning of e-government, there has been a concern that digital technologies do not reach certain segments of the population, and digital services are not equally friendly to all groups in the population.

2. Transparency: Transparency is usually defined as the principle of enabling the public to gain information about the operations and structures, decision-making processes and outcomes and performance of the public sector. Transparency encompasses multiple channels, sub-dimensions, which include: access to information frameworks; mandatory disclosure; and proactive, voluntary disclosure, including open government data (OGD)

3. Accountability: As described in the World Public Sector report 2019, participation (in combination with transparency) is often a key component of accountability mechanisms, for examples those related to holding governments responsible for the provision of public services.

4. Communication: A large part of the exchange of information that takes place between governments to citizens does not directly stem from participation goals. This encompasses, inter alia, communication about what the government does; communication about rules as they apply to public services and citizens' obligations (laws, regulations, codes, etc.); and individualized communication between the government and citizens regarding administrative transactions that concern them.

**Spectrum of e-participation according to the political dimension and level of participation and examples of associated tools**

		More Political	Less Political
Less Engagement		Construction of political discourse	Policy- making
		Public service delivery	
Provision of Information		Political parties' website, social media	Provision of information on laws, regulations, strategies, budgets, administrative processes, etc.
		Voting advice applications	Open Government Data
		Parties platforms	Customer feedback
		Candidates' website, social media	Consultations on services
Consultation		E-voting and m-voting	Participatory planning (e.g. urban)
		Agenda setting (e.g. e parties, collaborative electoral platforms)	Co-production (e.g. crowdsourced disaster maps)
Collaboration			Co-creation (e.g. innovation competitions, hackatons)
More Engagement			Participatory budgeting Focus of the e-government Survey

**Challenges to E-Participation**

1. **Understanding the role of digital divide(s):** Digital divide has been a concern since the beginning of e-government. While, in line with the heavy technology focus of e-government at its beginning, the digital divide was initially framed in terms of access to technology (infrastructure, then Internet, then broadband), the concept has been broadened and refined to include a series of layers that combine to exclude certain groups from e-government and more generally from voice in digital governance.

2. **Broadening the focus beyond technology to social and institutional factors:** While the technological dimension of e-participation is clearly important, exclusive or quasi-exclusive focus on technology has been perceived as an important limitation and cause for failure of e-participation projects since the beginning of e-participation as a distinct sphere of activity

3. **Being clear on the goals of e-participation:** It has been observed that failure of e-participation initiatives can often be traced to a lack of clear objectives for e-participation. This

is not specific to e-participation initiatives; it was already observed in the 1970s, before e-government came into existence.

**4. The need to analyse varied, hard to reconcile stakeholders' expectations and incentives to participate:** Many e-participation initiatives have suffered from what have called "shallow stakeholder analysis". Failing to properly analyse stakeholders' motivation to engage can lead to missed opportunities to tap citizens' skills for coproducing public services, co-creation and innovation, and contribution to the policy debate.

**5. Taking into account lack of trust in governments, the Internet and social media:** Citizen take-up and sustained use of e-participation depends in a large part on their trust in government institutions, but also on their trust of Internet in general and of specific components of participation platforms such as social media.

**6. Establishing clear linkages between e-participation mechanisms and decision-making processes:** In the field of policy-making, clearly defining and publicizing the process by which inputs from citizens will be taken into account in decision-making. In the field of service delivery, this means putting in place mechanisms through which government can act on the feedback provided by citizens and force service providers to respond to it.

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